

# “Attending to Doomsday Deceivers or...?” by Kolya Braun-Greiner

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## Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

One biblical commentary I read gave today's gospel text an intriguing if not alarming title: "Doomsday Deceivers." The disciples have come with Jesus to Jerusalem – and when they see the magnificence of city they are mesmerized. "What large stones and what large buildings!" It's as if a group of rural peasants landed in the midst of the glitz of New York City's times square. But what seems most ironically humorous is that their experience immediately follows the story of the widow's mite, who gives from her greatly from her heart of her meager wealth in contrast to the grand material wealth of the city. Ched Meyers points out the disparity here – the economic

contrast of her poverty with the glorious buildings built by extracted wealth of both the Roman empire and temple power.

Jesus' response to the disciple's naiveté bursts the balloon of their misplaced attention: "not one of these stones will remain... All will be thrown down." Jesus is pointing to both their own deception as well as warning them of "anyone who would deceive you" or "lead you astray." We might remember that the Gospel of Mark was the earliest gospel was probably written about the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70AD.

Lest we feel unique in the turbulence of our own time let's look at what was happening the time this text was written: (1)occupation by foreign troops; (2)class conflicts, which included anticlericalism; (3)social banditry; (4)religious fanaticism and the concept of God as a divine warrior;(5)revolutionary prophets and messianic pretenders;(6)misconduct on the part of Roman officials;(7)strife between the various factions of Jewish revolutionaries;(8)taxation, both by the Romans and by Herod and his successors;(9)the bitter hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans.

Given this context, there were many sources of "Doomsday deceivers." Jesus is warning the disciples and Mark warning his community not to be deceived by them.

So how are we deceived? I'm reminded of chant created by Paulette Meier based upon Quaker teaching: "Art thou in the Darkness? Mind it not, for thou dost it will feed thee more. But stand still and act not, and wait in patience, till Light arises out of Darkness and leads thee."

Perhaps the most deceiving thing is that many of those who do believe in the existence of human caused climate change are becoming pessimistic about our ability to actually reduce it significantly enough to save ourselves at the very least or

maintain any quality of life within the generation of my daughters age.

Frankly, this is deeply troubling. I worry when I hear that there are people who are well aware of the threat of climate change, but believe that it's too late to do anything about it. Humanity giving up on itself is more frightening to me than climate change.

The threat is real. I'm not going to be Pollyanna or engage in magical thinking about this. But, like the disciples there may be a mistaken direction of attention. If I only listened to or read the headlines that pop up on my cell phone selected for me because I show an interest in climate change, I would want to crawl in a hole some days. "The Earth is in Death Spiral" (Guardian, Nov. 14, 2017), "Arctic Sea Ice Lowest on Record" (NASA, Sept. 27, 2018), "Sixth Major Extinction Underway and it's Our Fault" ( World Economic Forum), "New Study Shows that Insect Populations Have Decreased 75% Over 3 Decades" (CNN Oct. 20, 2017). This last devastating piece of information points out that the "Loss of insect diversity and abundance is expected to provoke cascading effects on food webs and to jeopardize ecosystem services."

So much negative news – and I feel as though I carry this stuff around that nobody wants to hear.

OK that's enough traumatizing information for now. We can easily become flooded and what happens then? We shut down to protect ourselves.

So, what gets our attention? I'm convinced that we do need to be aware of – as my Native American brothers and sisters often say – "living in reality." But if our exposure to reality is skewed primarily in the direction of negative – stories of destruction, desecration, and horrendous suffering, we may actually have a log in our eyes. I deeply appreciate what writer Rebecca Solit says about pessimism and despair – they

are actually a luxury. People struggling for justice throughout the world don't have the luxury of pessimism. They are fighting for their very lives.

So, do we pay attention to the headlines or the trend-lines?  
(check out [humanprogress.org](http://humanprogress.org))

I was recently invited out of the blue to offer a presentation to a group of environmental educators, most of them were park rangers, 11 women and 1 man (mostly young adults), who were members of group they'd formed to support each other's efforts to promote education about climate change within their work. The meet quarterly around a theme, and the theme which I was asked to address was spirituality. Since I serve as Religious Educator with Interfaith Partners I found this to be an intriguing invitation, so I accepted. It was there that I learned two profound things – First, among these environmental educators, 10 out of 12 of them had grown up attending church with their families, 8 of them Catholic, but none of them were currently part of a faith community. After my talk about faith teachings on environmental stewardship along with the affirmation of climate change by both the Catholic Church (in 2002) and mainline protestant denominations, several of the people in the room exclaimed “Why have I never heard about this?!” “My priest never talked about caring for Creation!” They felt betrayed and deceived by their faith traditions, but I also sensed a sigh of relief in the room – as if, ah now I see that my faith is relevant to my passion for the environment.

Second profound thing – the speaker immediately following my presentation was Frank Niepold, the climate education coordinator at NOAA who just returned from a conference “Drawdown Learn: A Solutions Based Approach to Climate Based Education.” The primary take-away – people aren't hearing enough good news. It turns out that hearing about good behavior change inspires hope and stimulates more good behavior! Unfortunately however, the majority of people now

believe that climate change is a reality, but too many of them are so discouraged by the bad news, the doomsday messages, they don't see any point in doing anything about it. What follows are some good news approaches:

From the Drawdown website:

*Project Drawdown is the most comprehensive plan ever proposed to reverse global warming. We did not make or devise the plan—the plan exists and is being implemented worldwide. It has been difficult to envision this possibility because the focus is overwhelmingly on the impacts of climate change. We gathered a qualified and diverse group of researchers from around the world to identify, research, and model the 100 most substantive, existing solutions to address climate change. What was uncovered is a path forward that can roll back global greenhouse gas emissions within thirty years. The research revealed that humanity has the means and techniques at hand. Nothing new needs to be invented, yet many more solutions are coming due to purposeful human ingenuity. The solutions we modeled are in place and in action. Humanity's task is to accelerate the knowledge and growth of what is possible as soon as possible.*

Excerpts from a talk by visionary Charles Eisenstein about his new book Climate: a New Story –

*The key concept of my new book, Climate: A New Story, sees the earth as a living planet, unlike the conventional climate discourse, which is heavily influenced by a geo-mechanical view of the world. From that view, fixing the planet becomes a matter of tweaking the atmospheric gas composition, just like you were adjusting the air/fuel mixture in a diesel engine.*

*A lot of the environmental conversation is based on fear. The basic narrative is we better change our ways; otherwise, bad things will happen to us.*

*And when climate change came along, environmentalists thought that this was a gift from heaven because now they're going to have to do the things we've wanted them to do. We have no choice now.*

*We always wanted clean energy, and now we're going to have to do it. And now, we can tell people, we can tell the policy establishment that you have no choice now. It's going to cost you money if you don't do this. It is a bargain with the devil. For one thing, you are implying that if, in fact, it won't harm us, then it's okay to do it.*

*...then we are reducing the sacred to the mundane. We're reducing the infinite to the finite by doing that. And we're switching from love to self-interest, and I think it's a huge mistake because to change our ways is going to require courage, and courage comes from love. It does not come from fear.*

*I call this flipping the script on climate change. Whatever your views on global warming, I think that the narrative that I'm offering is more effective as a call to love and to care, as a call to intimacy with the precious beings of nature.*

One example:

A "focus on regenerative agriculture to rebuild the soil. In school, we learned that it takes 500 years to build an inch of soil. Actually, it takes one year, if you do it right. People like Ernst Götsh in Brazil, Allan Savory, Gabe Brown, and various people in the permaculture, regenerative agriculture field, who are healing land. Springs that have been dry for 30 years come back to life. Rivers that stopped flowing year-round begin flowing again. Biodiversity returns... Songbirds that haven't been seen in the area for decades return. These are really tangible things."

Let's bring this home.

Just this week it seemed that the holy Spirit was pointing my attention to good news I hadn't known about previously – just in time for this sermon! Last year the MD legislature passed the Healthy Soils Act. As part of implementing the building of healthy soils in MD agriculture scientists, environmentalists and farmers are promoting the phase out of Roundup, the glyphosate pesticide that – get this – kills the organisms in the soil responsible for sequestering carbon. Nationwide there is a movement toward carbon farming. I learned a couple years ago that the movement to combat climate change has almost entirely focused on preventing carbon emissions. They largely ignored what turns out to offer even deeper cuts in carbon – soils, trees, and other biomass. The metaphor for this is focusing entirely on turning off the faucet of a bathtub -which is necessary, but if we widen the drain we can exponentially increase our positive effect. This week Montgomery County Climate Mobilization focused on regenerative agriculture as one of the strategies to remove CO2 from our atmosphere to be included in the declaration of a climate emergency that Montgomery Council which the Mobilization helped pass a year ago, that calls for an 80% reduction of all greenhouse gases by 2027.

Another local example drawn from my own work at Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake: Trees for Sacred Places. Over the past 4 years we've instigated the planting of over 13,000 trees at over 200 congregations, retreat centers and religious camps, sequestering 320 tons of CO2 and filtering pollution out of 13 million gallons of water. I thank Seekers for supporting this ministry to which I am committed.

And some other examples of Drawdown good news:

From Biomimicry – the wisdom of the earth will teach us if we are willing to be students of earth.

The immensity of a program to reforest large swaths of the Amazon is hard to conceive – it aims to plant millions of

trees over a remote area of Brazil roughly the size of Pennsylvania. If that wasn't a big enough challenge, there's also the threat seedlings face from dry spells, non-native plants and the voracious leaf-cutter ant.

Enter a Brazilian industrial engineer and his partners, who think they have a solution. The team calls their invention Nucleario – a circular device the size of a bicycle tire that creates a safe oasis for a young tree, complete with mulchy ground cover, a water cistern to conserve rainfall and a wall to keep out invasive plants and creatures. modeled after the bromeliad plant, which can hold up to three gallons of water.

This all part of what Drawdown calls “Afforestation” planting trees where there weren't any previously – creates a carbon sink, drawing in and holding on to carbon and distributing it into the soil.

OR Blue Planet Ltd. of California makes various forms of rock and sand by combining carbon dioxide pollution with calcium to use it as building material instead of concrete which produces 5-6% of annual emissions. The process prevents the greenhouse gas from polluting the atmosphere.

All these innovative solutions also need to be viewed within a political and economic context. *A fascinating analysis by the social science professor Kevin MacKay contends that oligarchy has been a more fundamental cause of the collapse of civilisations than social complexity or energy demand. Economic elites, which benefit from social dysfunction, block the necessary solutions.*

From “Climate Apocalypticism”  
<https://politicaltheology.com/climate-apocalypticism/>

*There are two dominant strains of this often-unspecified hope. The first is a straightforward hope in the world. The right combination of policy and technology will mean that we can maintain our world, just with less pollution, emissions*



*and waste. The second is a hope that confronting climate change will push humanity to reconsider its relationship with other-than-human nature and enter a new period of ecologically-responsible civilization.*

*Both these forms of hope are problematic. The first perpetuates a world of ecological violence. It takes climate change to be the central issue rather than a symptom of deeper problems. Climate change is addressed as a technological issue rather than an ethical and political one. The second strain of hope underestimates the extent to which the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature cannot be isolated from other political, economic and social questions.*

The recent upsurge of exercising the political muscle of our democracy (articulated by Pat Conover last week) gives me hope, but of course we have a long ways to go before we've overcome oligarchy.

Which brings us back to Jesus admonishing the disciples who were also living in an oligarchy. He calls for patient endurance, as if in labor, to be prepared for the "tribulations" in the form of earthquakes, famines, tsunami?, wildfires? But these are not the final end. Not to be glib, but an little aphorism appeared to me on my recent retreat at Dayspring: *Everything will be alright in the end. If everything isn't OK, it isn't the end!* My soul has to believe that. Something new is being birthed. We've come this far by faith and God will not abandon life in the face of what appear to be apocalyptic signs.

Mytho-poet-storyteller-mentor Michael Meade (I mentioned his rendering of the Woman who Re-weaves the World in my last sermon) refers to our time as the "slow apocalypse." Interestingly he unpacks the word apocalypse – in Greek meaning "unveiling," or the veil is lifted from our

deceptions. One of those deceptions is that we are isolated. In my meanderings led by the Spirit this week I was led to discover a book, The Great Re-imagining: Spirituality in an Age of Apocalypse by Theodore Richards which addresses the temptations to be deceived into isolation: *The true end of the world for the human being is the belief that we are alone. We of course cannot be physically alone; but we can become psychically alone. In our isolation, our independence, we lose the connections that make us human. To stare at the screen, to lose the binds of culture and community, is to arrive at the apocalypse.*

By committing to community as we do here at Seekers, we live out our trust that God will not give up on us. The community expressed in the emerging Nature group affirms the restorative power that the natural world has for our souls. Our God is in the Psalmist words, is “close at my right hand and always before” us. May we in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews “hold fast to hope and provoke one another to love and do good deeds, all the while looking for the good news, supporting those efforts which are healing, restorative and just, all the more as you see the Day (parousia) approaching.” May we may be “shown the path of life” during a “time of great anguish” as the scripture from Daniel (12:1-3) describes, when the “wise shall shine like the bright sky and lead others to righteousness like forever shining stars.”

From Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis:

*The whole this is grace, Everything in the Universe—everything that has brought forth the carbon in my body, my body itself, the trees that are shining outside my window, the bees that are flying around collecting pollen—it’s all grace if we recognize it. It’s there for us.*